



AUDIO NEWS

REPEAT TO FADE

Apple CEO Steve Jobs recently had to defend the company's environmental record in response to questions at its shareholders' AGM. Since then, the company has announced a free iPod recycling programme in the US. Unwanted iPods can be taken to any American Apple store for free "environmentally friendly" recycling. Customers qualify for 10 per cent off a new iPod bought on the same day. Apple said that hazardous material from the recycling process should stay within the US. However, there is no word as yet on similar schemes for other territories.

FROG OFF

When planning to include music downloads in the singles chart, those responsible could not have predicted that it would help Jamster's insanely annoying Crazy Frog keep established band Coldplay from the number one spot. However, figures released in June showed that downloads of Beethoven's first five symphonies have outstripped both artists. The symphonies were made available to coincide with Radio 3's Beethoven season. If eligible, Beethoven's First would have topped the singles chart for the second week in June (Sunday 5th to Friday 10th), with more than 160,000 requests.



REVIEW HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER

TOSHIBA Gigabeat F20

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £210 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.com

DETAILS www.gigabeat.toshiba.co.uk

Manufacturers began adding colour screens to MP3 players over a year ago. Many products now have them, but their low resolution and small display area mean they aren't a great way to view photos.

Toshiba's Gigabeat may change that. Like the iPod Photo, its colour screen measures 5.6cm across the diagonal. However, its 320x240 resolution means it can display twice the detail of its rival. This is immediately noticeable when you look at the screen: the menu graphics and fonts look great and the pictures have fantastic detail and high contrast.

The player itself also looks very classy. The case is a mix of two well-chosen silver plastics with a brushed metal inlay on the front. The function buttons gathered on the right side glow blue when the backlight is active and there's also a distinctive cross-shaped touch-sensitive controller.

Sadly, the F20's sound quality was a let-down. Music sounded muddy and none of the many preset EQ modes seemed to bring it up to scratch. We wondered if the uncomfortable earphones might be to blame and tried a high-quality pair. These showed a startling improvement, indicating that the player itself produces good quality sound.

Toshiba calls the Gigabeat's control system Plus Touch. The cross is touch-sensitive rather than a clickable switch, but only the four points and centre act as buttons. The function of each is context-sensitive, but the screen displays a control map so you know what to expect from your key presses. We found it simple to use, but we struggled to find the main menu during track playback.



Higher capacity Gigabeat models come with a remote control, but the 20GB player we tested does not. Toshiba supplies a USB cradle, but the player can be connected to a PC or recharged without it. Music is managed by Windows Media Player 10, Napster or Toshiba's own Gigabeat Room software, all of which are supplied. It's a shame you can't play audio files copied using Explorer, but Gigabeat Room is better than most. The battery lasted for 15 hours playing audio files, making it more than a match for the iPod Photo.

The Gigabeat's excellent screen sets it apart from other photo-capable MP3 players, provided you don't need to transfer images directly from a camera. If you don't need a screen, though, you can buy a 40GB player for this price.

Simon Handby

✓ Fantastic screen; high-quality sound; decent product manual

✗ Terrible headphones; no radio or record function

SPECIFICATIONS 20GB hard disk, USB Hi-Speed interface, MP3, WMA and WAV playback, JPEG display. **Part code** MEG-F20

HOTLIST 2.1 SPEAKERS

TRUST 2.1 Speaker Set SP-3600A

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £33 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.microdirect.co.uk

DETAILS www.trust.com



These classy speakers have a remote that includes a volume control, line input and headphone socket. Sound quality was extremely good in our tests, with solid bass and detailed mid and high frequencies. They aren't massively loud, and the satellite cables are only 1.5 metres long, but they're great value.



SPECIFICATIONS 2.1 speakers, line and aux inputs, 28W RMS power. **Part code** 14235

HOTLIST SOUND CARD

CREATIVE Audigy 2 ZS

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £53 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.microdirect.co.uk

DETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>



The inputs and outputs on Creative's Audigy 2 ZS are capable of 24-bit, 96kHz recording and playback for increased clarity. Specialist sound cards have better signal-to-noise performance, but the Audigy's unsurpassed games effects, excellent games bundle and exhaustive DVD-Video and DVD-Audio support make it a great buy for avid gamers or music enthusiasts.



SPECIFICATIONS Line, mic and optical S/PDIF inputs, four line (7.1) outputs, PCI interface. **Part code** 70S035000005

HOTLIST SURROUND SPEAKER SET

LOGITECH Z-5500

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £211 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.microdirect.co.uk

DETAILS www.logitech.co.uk

Logitech's 5.1 Z-5500 speakers have what it takes to satisfy most people's surround-sound needs. They're powerful enough to shake the house with 505W RMS, and they deliver rich bass thanks to the large sub-woofer.

The speakers are THX-certified and come with a DTS and Dolby Digital decoder, so you can plug in a DVD player as well as a PC.



SPECIFICATIONS 5.1 surround sound, 505W RMS, optical and coaxial digital inputs, three stereo inputs, Dolby Digital and DTS decoder **Part code** 970115-0120

REVIEW **HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER****SAMSUNG**
YH-925

RATING ★★

PRICE £203 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.comDETAILS www.samsung.co.uk

Given its price and specification, Samsung's YH-925 is a clear competitor to Toshiba's Gigabeat reviewed opposite. Both are 20GB players with 1.8" hard disks. They can play back MP3 or WMA files and display JPG images on a colour screen. Samsung's figures suggest that the YH-925 has a shorter battery life than the Gigabeat, but this device has the advantage of an FM radio and a record function.

It is not as attractive or as lightweight as the Gigabeat, but it feels like a well-made product. A simple four-way rocker switch provides navigation through the player's menu system, which is easy to understand and use. Dedicated buttons at the side cover track skip, play, pause and power.

At 4.6cm, its screen isn't much smaller than that of the Toshiba. However, its quality is inferior. Its low resolution means photos are displayed with a grid-like texture and diagonal lines are noticeably blocky. Contrast is sensitive to the horizontal viewing angle: we couldn't find a viewpoint from which detail was preserved in both light and dark areas.

We had hoped the sound quality would be an improvement over the display. However, the YH-925 sounds unusually bad for a hard disk-based player. No custom EQ mode is available and the default Flat preset is simply too flat, with little high-end treble or bass.

Other presets suffer from harsh treble with little clarity, or muddy bass that distorts at less than half-volume. When we tested the device with other earphones, there was little improvement.



The YH-925 has a decent radio, which can receive a signal in areas of the *Shopper* office that are no-go for most players. We weren't impressed with its battery, which lasted only seven hours nine minutes when playing test MP3 and WMA files.

Music files must be transferred to the YH-925 using Samsung's Music Studio software, which we found unintuitive. The player connects to a computer using a proprietary cable and it isn't easy to use with multiple PCs. However, there is a useful USB host mode that allows the player to act as a backup device for supported digital cameras.

Without a decent display, there's little to distinguish the YH-925 from regular hard disk players. The Gigabeat does a much better job of displaying photos, but we prefer the Creative 40GB Zen Touch in our Hotlist below.

Simon Handby

 Solid feel

 Poor sound quality; inflexible; inferior screen

SPECIFICATIONS 20GB hard disk, USB Hi-Speed interface, MP3, WMA playback, JPEG display. **Part code** YH-925GS

HOTLIST **HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER****CREATIVE**
Zen Touch

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £147 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.comDETAILS <http://uk.europe.creative.com>

It may look like a poor man's iPod, but the Zen Touch has a few features going for it over its famous rival. Its headphones are better, it provides plenty of volume and the battery lasts an astounding 23 hours.

It's simple to use, great value for money and comes highly recommended.



SPECIFICATIONS 20GB hard disk, USB Hi-Speed interface, MP3, WMA and Wav playback. **Part code** 70PF099000000

HOTLIST **HARD DISK MP3 PLAYER****ARCHOS**
Gmini XS200

RATING ★★★★★

PRICE £165 inc VAT

SUPPLIER www.dabs.comDETAILS www.archos.com

Barely bigger than 2GB players, the Gmini XS200 squeezes a 20GB hard disk into its tiny case. It still has a large screen, though. Only the unlabelled buttons gave us some trouble, and we frequently pressed the wrong key. However, for the price it's amazing value and works well.



SPECIFICATIONS 20GB hard disk, USB Hi-Speed interface, MP3, WMA and Wav playback. **Part code** 500669

CHOOSING A...
SPEAKER
SYSTEM

Follow our sound advice to selecting the best speaker setup

1 PC speaker systems, which consist of speakers and an amplifier to power them, can cost anything from £5 to £300. The cheapest sets, with specs shown in grey below, will be fine for those who simply want to play Windows alert noises on a PC they use solely for work.

2 Those who use their PC for any kind of entertainment should go for a better system. The first thing to look for is a sub-woofer, which handles bass frequencies, while the satellites output mid- and high-frequency sounds. Other than this, the best way to establish the quality of a system is to consult our reviews. Specs don't tell you much and price often bears little relation to performance.

3 Games and DVDs will benefit greatly from a surround system. The standard surround configuration is 5.1 (five satellites and one sub-woofer), but those who must have the latest technologies should consider 6.1 or 7.1 speakers, plus a compatible sound card that will support the extended Dolby Digital EX format.

4 The power rating can give you a rough idea of how loud the speakers will go. Ignore PMPO or Peak Power ratings, which can be as much as 10 times the RMS figure. A 50W RMS system should provide ample volume for a desktop PC, but for a home cinema look for 100W or more.

5 Stereo speakers just need a single analogue stereo input, while a 5.1 system needs three. Surround systems with Dolby Digital decoders must be fed via an S/PDIF digital input, which comes in (non-compatible) coaxial and optical versions. However, as Dolby Digital decoding can be handled in software, surround speakers with analogue inputs are much more cost-effective.

FILL IN YOUR SPECS HERE
(Recommended minimum in grey)

SURROUND FORMAT: Stereo

RMS POWER: 5W

INPUTS: 1x analogue

BUILT-IN DECODING: None